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Pisk, Dr. Paul A.. "Can the worker find an inner connection with Contemporary Music?"

Dr. Paul Pisk. „Kann der Arbeiter ein inneres Verhältnis zur Zeigenössischen Musik finden?" *Kunst und Volk. Mitteilungen des Vereines Sozialdemokratische Kunststelle* Nummer 2, Februar 1927, 2e Jahrgang, s. 4-5. http://roteswien.com/pisk/Pisk%20Kann%20der%20Arbeiter.pdf

Translated and annotated with a commentary by Paul Werner.

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As in any art, so too in Music: there is no shared understanding of what constitutes the contemporary. Leaving aside that in most periods of History living artists spontaneously produce stylistically divergent works, the productions of our own younger generation are totally dissimilar from one another. This may be related to the fact that our generation lacks the cultural community of minds that alone can make a shared artistic creativity possible. In this era of intense individualism, especially among thinkers and among these above all artists, each speaks his own language and is understood by few.[1] Here we shall address that

[1] That Music is not inducted from an ideal of Music but is a product of social processes, was repeatedly noted by Schoenberg, at the risk of being accused of privileging Western, and specifically German music; see Julian Horton, review: *From Classicism to Modernism: Western Musical Culture and the Metaphysics of Order* by Brian K. Etter; *Programming the Absolute: Nineteenth-Century German Music and the Hermeneutics of the Moment* by Berthold Hoeckner." *Music Analysis* Vol. 24, No. 1/2 (Mar. - Jul. 2005): 235-262. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3840781

type of music that's at a remove from the harmonic and melodic thinking of the general public—by which is meant the music-loving, music-receptive, but musically untrained masses. It is widely known that in recent years, in all lands and irrespective of mutual influences, musicians have been seeking new means of expression that strongly differ from those previously in use. The lay public initially find themselves at a total loss before this music; naturally, then, they tend either to reject it as nonsense or to misinterpret it because they lack the skills to absorb it.

Before laying out the path to an understanding of this new art, it would be appropriate to set forth the principles of Music Appreciation. These vary greatly, depending on the mental disposition and the outlook of the listener. The bottommost group, the *absorbers*, perceive a sequence of sounds and sound patterns the way one looks through a kaleidoscope, or as one watches the unfolding of images in a film.[2] This interaction merely involves the unfolding of a colorful sequence without stirring up the deeper emotional or intellectual faculties. On a higher level there are the *listeners* who, though unable to follow consciously the sequence of musical events, nevertheless receive sense impressions from listening: either they conjure interesting images before their mind's eye, or they feel ill-defined "moods." The music acts upon them through the soul: this, too, is not enough to understand Music.

For, to the listeners with a genuine, even if unconscious, understanding, the inner organizational principles of a work of art must be clear. They must sense that a formal, architectonically self-sufficient structure is be-

[2] From Schopenhauer the members of the Second Viennese School had taken the notion that the passive and purely intuitive appreciation of art which in Kant is the *summum bonum*, is in fact its lowest rung, thereby reversing the bourgeois hierarchy of appreciation.

ing presented to their senses, whose beauty is not merely proportionate to such feelings as they themselves are able to invest, but lies in the consistency of its structure and development.[3]

It's much easier to observe and identify the formal elements in architecture and pictures. Music, however unfolds in the ear; it plays itself out in time, not in space, and for most people a sense of time is less developed than a sense of spatial organization. The visual presentation of music, which puts forth a kind of optical explanation of the acoustic process, is on the whole unintelligible to the great mass of average listeners; even among those who understand their meaning these visual signs are often not accessible to interpretation as representations of sound.[4]

Among the great majority of listeners the possibility of conducting practical "Formal Analysis" (meaning the possibility of making clear, through analysis, the cohesion of a single composition) is excluded from the outset so long as the individual listener does not have the competence to read and to parse for him- or herself. In a concert setting one gets help from so-called "Program Notes" in booklets wherein the history of the individual work is described in part, while those points that are particularly characteristic for their emotional effect are highlighted. Naturally

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[3] "[The student] will come to the conclusion that much of what has been considered aesthetically fundamental, that is, necessary to beauty, is by no means always rooted in the nature of things, that the imperfection of our senses drives us to those compromises through which we achieve order. For order is not demanded by the object, but by the subject." Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony* [*Harmonielehre*], Third Edition, trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley: University of California Press 1983), 29. Schoenberg sets himself against the commonplace, made popular by Friedrich Schiller, that it's the object, not the subject, that "demands order."

[4] Pisk's colleague Hanns Eisler gives a more extensive dissection of the limits of traditional training in the performance and appreciation of music in Hanns Eisler, „Muß der Musikfreund etwas von Musiktheorie wissen?" *Musik der Gegenwart, Eine Flugblätterfolge*, Nr. 8, o. J., Wien: Musikblätter des Anbruch, 1925; reprinted in Hanns Eisler, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Günter Mayer; Bd. I, *Musik und Politik. Schriften 1924-1928*, ed. Stephanie Eisler and Manfred Grabs (Leipzig: VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1973): 22-25.

this provides a suitable substitute only in the narrowest sense, by enabling "comprehension."

All in all, the musical education of the layperson has advanced so far today that they can easily assimilate whole folk songs and dances. They are able to follow precisely short sections of a melody that's been clearly articulated; to note the recurrence of similar elements; and to sense the presence of contrasts. The perception of harmonic cadences as deliberate and necessary chord progressions signaling the conclusion of a section allows the listener to become aware of the developmental process of the composition. Works of the Classical and Romantic period, however, no longer raise simplicity in the construction of melody and cadence to the same level of importance as folk music, therefore the specific impression that a worker, for instance, experiences from a folk-song will be so much the less defined as it is invested in larger tonal structures. On top of that, a grasp of pure music without words is much more difficult than for music with a text, because in this latter approach at least the words direct the listener's thoughts and feelings in a specific direction.

Because modern music eschews not only simple melodic lines but also cadences in the traditional sense, the path toward a clear perception can only be reached with great difficulty by the average listener: the impression provided by the progression of sounds along with an intuitive understanding of formal musical processes are not enough to grasp the work. On the other hand, without training the path toward intellectual grasp is closed. All that's left by way of resources is that which constitutes the most powerful teacher in all other fields of human life: one's own experience and slow, gradual familiarization, in this case through consistent, ever-repeated exposure to these compositions.

If only on behalf of their own worldview, the workers must struggle on behalf of the New that points the way to the Future. Therefore they should not reject, unheard, in any form, the music of the present; nor should they allow themselves to be swayed by those among their musical pedagogues who limit themselves mostly to specific art movements, to the point where the workers labor to understand only classical or other acceptable compositions and display no understanding of other genres.[5] If they are musically unformed it will not be much easier for them to grasp ancient classical works than modern ones.

And since the hope among us all is that the People as a whole, the Proletariat, shall be the bearer of musical culture into the Future, it is important today even to promote the workers' engagement with music, so that the artists of the present may mold the society of the Future.[6] Despite our conflicting schools, despite the eccentricities of many artists, the traces of such a genuinely social art can already be detected. The task requires tenacity and dedication; but the worker, whose progress is made difficult in other aspects of life as well, is capable of undertaking it.

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[5] Schoenberg's teaching was extremely eclectic in its choice of examples and did not include contemporary works. The *Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen* occasionally performed arrangements of Johann Strauss and other "light" music.

[6] In a remarkable turn, Pisk's initial call for the individual worker to improve his or her consciousness through music blends with Georg Lukács's theoretical analysis of the consciousness of the Working Class as a whole, written during his residency in Vienna. Class consciousness according to Pisk includes a musical consciousness as well; see Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. [*Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein: Studien über marxistische Dialektik*, 1923], trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971.

COMMENTARY

In America Paul Amadeus Pisk (1893-1990) is remembered as a musicologist and teacher. In Vienna he obtained a doctorate in Musicology, then studied with Arnold Schoenberg and served as Secretary of Schoenberg's *Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen* (Society for Private Music Performances). Pisk was also a co-founder of the International Society for Contemporary Music and an editor for *Der Anbruch*, "generally regarded as '*the* musical forum for contemporary music' in the 1920s and 1930s" (Hass 2004). Like many "Cultural Socialists" his commitment had begun before World War One, when he taught musical practice to working-class students. After the founding of the First Republic in 1919 he joined the leadership of Vienna's *Sozialistische Kunststelle* (Socialist Art Section), writing music criticism for the Party newspaper, the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*:

> I was the representative for public music from the Social Democratic Party, and was music critic for this time with the consent of Schoenberg. Schoenberg was very autocratic, and I had to ask him if I can accept this. He said, "This paper [*Arbeiter-Zeitung*] doesn't accept the advertising of concerts and concert agents, so you can go there and be objective." He knew that I was for new music, and this journal was very widely read (Duffie 1986).

As a teacher, Pisk extended the pre-War tradition of raising the musical skills of workers in order to empower them, one of the few political activities tolerated in nineteenth- century Vienna. (Between 1896 and 1898 Schoenberg himself directed a worker's chorus that was repeatedly threatened with dissolution by the authorities.) Starting in 1919, Pisk taught alongside Hanns Eisler at the Kunststelle-affiliated *Verein für volkstümliche Musikpflege*, a "People's Conservatory" that offered an advanced degree (*OeML* entries "Arbeiter-Musikbewegung;"

"Pisk;" "Kunststelle"). From 1919 on he taught music appreciation and harmony at the *Volkshochschule* (People's High Schools), where his syllabus evolved from Schoenberg's foundational *Harmonielehre* to Intermediate Counterpoint (*VHA*, entry "Pisk;" Pisk 1921). Both within and without the educational system Pisk organized numerous popular concerts of classical and contemporary music, including his own; as well as organizing and leading any number of worker's choirs.

Founded in 1926, the journal *Kunst und Volk* was meant to bridge the gap between "High" Art—including Contemporary Art—and the Working Class. Its intended readership was the *Vertrauensmänner*, "shop stewards" or "trustees" of the Social Democratic Party charged with ensuring communication with the rank-and-file.

According to Helmut Gruber (1991, p. 101), the respected authoritarian on Red Vienna,

> In 1931 *Kunst und Volk* ceased publication, allegedly for financial reasons. […] One is forced to agree [...] that the Kunststelle failed in its mission—not [...] because it did not live up to its potential, but because it pursued false and hopeless goals. Most of its artistic program was based on turning the worker into a passive consumer. Whatever active artistic resources existed in working-class communities were rejected or ignored.

Gruber's "false and hopeless goals" as he describes them were the incompatible extremes of two relatively compatible orientations referenced in Sochor's analysis (1988) of early Soviet cultural politics (p. 175):

> Lenin and Bogdanov offered different definitions of *political culture*. ... One definition involved the mythologizing of the party and its superior ability to lead the

> "working masses" [...] The other glorified the workers and their innate aptitude for attaining knowledge, political consciousness, and self-transformation.

In practice both approaches were shared or contested in varying degrees in the political culture of Red Vienna, though one might argue that a majority of actors on all planes—political, aesthetic or even military—positioned themselves closer to the "glorifying" end of the spectrum than the Marxist-Leninist: Bogdanov's theories were derived from the Viennese physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach who was widely respected in Red Vienna. As for Gruber's misconstrued argument that the goal of the Kunststelle was to "turn the worker into a passive consumer," it confuses two phenomena, the imputed political passivity of the worker before the "leadership," and the rise of a culture of passive consumers in nineteen-twenties Europe. In the Fabian Socialist tradition, the Kunststelle was set up in resistance—partially futile—to the new market economy, not as another aspect of it; when Gruber assesses the journal's failure in terms of marketability (at the height of the depression, no less) he's fighting the worker with the master's tools; likewise, by confusing political and military autonomy with cultural autonomy, Gruber transposes the fully justified accusation that Vienna's Social Democratic leadership failed to empower the workers *militarily* to the separate issue, whether they failed to empower the workers *culturally*. There is little argument that the Social Democratic leadership, by attempting to control and direct the worker's spontaneous resistance to Fascism, set itself up for catastrophe; but the same accusation is hardly applicable to cultural activities: Mahler, Schiele, Schoenberg were just a few among the many Viennese artists, cultural workers and politicians empowered by Schopenhauer's rupture with the Enlightened tradition of Immanuel Kant that conceived the reception of works of art as a form of passive contemplation derived from "natural" aptitudes that, in the end, happened to be the aptitudes of the privileged white middle-class male (Schoenberg 1983, pp. 18 & 29): the problem of the cultural autonomy of the working class comes up repeatedly in *Kunst und Volk*. Though Pisk himself derived his approach to musical instruction from Schoenberg, his cultural politics had much in common with David Josef Bach, a close

friend of and major influence on Schoenberg with a keen interest in Mach who headed the Kunststelle while sharing the music desk at the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* with Pisk:

> For Bach as well as for other socialist culture experts, bourgeois cultural forms attained a revolutionizing value simply [*sic*] because the workers apprehended them (Gruber 1991, p. 101).

Is there a problem here? No-one could seriously argue that the worker's apprehension of the twelve-tone system was a simple affair—or its apprehension by the bourgeoisie, even today. If the music of Schoenberg, Berg or Webern are truly "bourgeois" cultural forms the bourgeoisie has been the last to find out; in fact they have still haven't figured it out: when a prominent American musical critic wrote recently (Ross 2015) of the "eternally disorienting atonality of Schoenberg" the implication was that the potential of Schoenberg's music to bring about the "Realm of Freedom" postulated by Friedrich Schiller (1795) was doomed in the same manner and degree as the potential for revolutionary change postulated by Marx. The argument might have made sense if Gruber had taken his confusion of cultural with political hegemonism to its logical conclusion and demonstrated the existence of a distinct "working-class culture" separate and in resistance to the supposedly imposed culture of the Social-Democratic Leadership (Maderthaner & Musner 2003). In reality the ability of the Social Democratic leadership to raise the revolutionary capabilities of the Working Class through Music was dependent on the degree to which music-making (and choral singing in particular) was embedded in working class culture to begin with—the very culture that was threatened by the rise of the mass media and its enforcement of passivity (*OeML* entry "Arbeiter-Musikbewegung"). How deeply the "revolutionizing values" of music-making penetrated and sustained working-class culture was made clear ((Maimann 1981, p. 159) on February 10, 1934, in the last hectic

days of the First Republic, when 60,000 people reunited for one last choral performance, surrounded by 15,000 police. What had begun as the first and only possible form of peaceful resistance ended up the last. As for Pisk, he left for America in 1936, closing the door on much of his past practice, musical and political.

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